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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1976

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ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR.,

U.S. Congressman from New York

Congressman from New York's 18th District, Chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor, and pastor of the world's largest congregation at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, Adam Clayton Powell was once the most controversial Negro politician in the United States.

Born in 1908 to Mattie Fletcher and Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Adam, Jr. was bred in New York City, and attended high school there before entering Colgate University.

The young Powell launched his career as a crusader for reform during the depth of the Depression. He forced several large corporations to drop their unofficial bans on employing Negroes, while, at the same time, directing a kitchen and relief operation which fed, clothed and provided fuel for thousands of Harlem's needy and destitute.

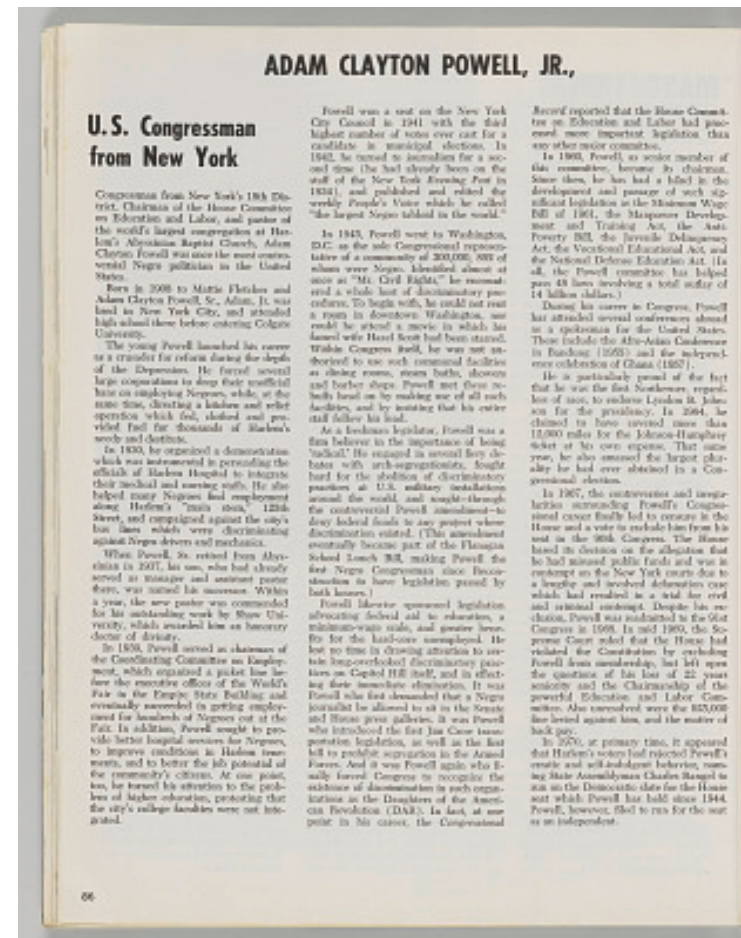
In 1930, he organized a demonstration which was instrumental in persuading the officials of Harlem Hospital to integrate their medical and nursing staffs. He also helped many Negroes find employment along Harlem's "main stem," 125th Street, and campaigned against the city's bus lines which were discriminating against Negro drivers and mechanics.

When Powell, Sr. retired from Abyssinian in 1937, his son, who had already served as manager and assistant pastor there, was named his successor. Within a year, the new pastor was commended for his outstanding work by Shaw University, which awarded him an honorary doctor of divinity.

In 1939, Powell served as chairman of the Coordinating Committee on Employment, which organized a picket line before the executive offices of the World's Fair in the Empire State Building and eventually succeeded in getting employment for hundreds of Negroes out at the Fair. In addition, Powell sought to provide better hospital services for Negroes, to improve conditions in Harlem tenements, and to better the job potential of the community's citizens. At one point, too, he turned his attention to the problem of higher education, protesting that the city's college faculties were not integrated.

Powell won a seat on the New York City Council in 1941 with the third highest number of votes ever cast for a candidate in municipal elections. In 1942, he turned to journalism for a second time (he had already been on the staff of the New York Evening Post in 1934), and published and edited the weekly People's Voice which he called "the largest Negro tabloid in the world."

In 1945, Powell went to Washington, D.C. as the sole Congressional representative of a community of 300,000, 89% of whom were Negro. Identified almost at once as "Mr. Civil Rights," he encountered a whole host of discriminatory procedures. To begin with, he could not rent a room in downtown Washington, nor could he attend a movie in which his famed wife Hazel Scott had been starred. Within Congress itself, he was not authorized to use such communal facilities as dining rooms, steam



baths, showers and barber shops. Powell met these rebuffs head on by making use of all such facilities, and by insisting that his entire staff follow his lead.

As a freshman legislator, Powell was a firm believer in the importance of being 'radical.' He engaged in several fiery debates with arch-segregationists, fought hard for the abolition of discriminatory practices at U.S. military installations around the world, and sought—through the controversial Powell amendment—to deny federal funds to any project where discrimination existed. (This amendment eventually became part of the Flanagan School Lunch Bill, making Powell the first Negro Congressman since Reconstruction to have legislation passed by both houses.)

Powell likewise sponsored legislation advocating federal aid to education, a minimum-wage scale, and greater benefits for the hard-core unemployed. He lost no time in drawing attention to certain long-overlooked discriminatory practices on Capitol Hill itself, and in effecting their immediate elimination. It was Powell who first demanded that a Negro journalist be allowed to sit in the Senate and House press galleries. It was Powell who introduced the first Jim Crow transportation legislation, as well as the first bill to prohibit segregation in the Armed Forces. And it was Powell again who finally forced Congress to recognize the existence of discrimination in such organizations as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). In fact, at one point in his career, the Congressional Record reported that the House Committee on Education and Labor had processed more important legislation than any other committee.

In 1960, Powell, as senior member of this committee, became its chairman. Since then, he has had a hand in the development and passage of such significant legislation as the Minimum Wage Bill of 1961, the Manpower Development and Training Act, the Anti-Poverty Bill, the Juvenile Delinquency Act, the Vocational Educational Act, and the National Defense Education Act. (In all, the Powell committee has helped pass 48 laws involving a total outlay of 14 billion dollars.)

During his career in Congress, Powell has attended several conferences abroad as a spokesman for the United States. These include the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (1955) and the independence celebration of Ghana (1957).

He is particularly proud of the fact that he was the first Northerner, regardless of race, to endorse Lyndon B. Johnson for the presidency. In 1964, he claimed to have covered more than 12,000 miles for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket at his own expense. That same year, he also amassed the largest plurality he had ever obtained in a Congressional election.

In 1967, the controversies and irregularities surrounding Powell's Congressional career finally led to censure in the House and a vote to exclude him from his seat in the 90th Congress. The House based its decision on the allegation that he had misused public funds and was in contempt on the New York courts due to a lengthy and involved defamation case which had resulted in a trial for civil and criminal contempt. Despite his exclusion, Powell was readmitted to the 91st Congress in 1968. In mid 1969, the Supreme Court ruled that the House had violated the Constitution by excluding Powell from membership, but

left open the questions of his loss of 22 years seniority and the Chairmanship of the powerful Education and Labor Committee. Also unresolved were the \$25,000 fine levied against him, and the matter of back pay.

In 1970, at primary time, it appeared that Harlem's voters had rejected Powell's erratic and self-indulgent behavior, naming State Assemblyman Charles Rangel to run on the Democratic slate for the House seat which Powell has held since 1944. Powell, however, filed to run for the seat as an independent.

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